

BENEDICT, MAXIMUS AND THE GREATER HOPE (Part II)

MICHAEL MODINI

In his encyclical *Spe Salvi* (2007), Pope Benedict XVI called St Maximus the Confessor ‘the great Greek Doctor of the Church’, thereby increasing the number of ecclesiastical Doctors so far named by the Pontiffs from thirty-three to thirty-four. In the first part of this study (*Compass* 2008, 2, pp. 31-37) I examined briefly St Maximus’ position on the two wills in Jesus Christ; in this second part I look at the doctrine of the salvation of all souls.

THE NOMINATION of St Maximus the Confessor as a Doctor of the Church was always a strong possibility; the most curious thing about it was that it took until 2007 to finally happen. The salient question is not so much: ‘Why Maximus?’, but: ‘Why did it take so long?’

The answer to this question lies possibly in Maximus’ approach to the tricky theological question of the apocatastasis, for his thinking on this subject has often been opposed by Catholic theologians. According to this doctrine, at the end of time all rational creatures—angels and human beings, whether good or evil—will be reconciled in God’s kingdom. Sometimes known as ‘the universal homecoming’, sometimes as the Greater Hope (as opposed to the merely Great Hope, which refers to the calling into eternal life of each individual¹), the word itself has an astrological background, standing for the return of planetary or stellar bodies to their initial starting point in the heavens².

The doctrine of the *apokatastasis pantôn* (‘restoration of all’) is based on a range of biblical sources. In Acts 3:21, Peter says that Jesus ‘must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything of which He spoke’, and while it is clear that Peter is referring here to the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises³, when combined with 1

Corinthians 15:28 (where Paul says that at the end of time ‘the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all’⁴), it becomes a potent mix. Other influential texts are 1 Corinthians 15:22 (‘As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive’) and 1 Timothy 2:3-4 (‘God our Saviour ... desires everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth’). At the Mass I attended on Sunday, the final hymn included a reference to ‘that great day when all will be one’. The proposition that all people will eventually come to enjoy eternal life is certainly a well-resourced one.

It is also a controversial teaching. In the eighteenth century it was the *apocatastasis* that was at the heart of the debate between Whitefield and Wesley, Calvinists and Arminians; and in the universal Church its history is at least as ancient as the early Alexandrian theologians. It was Clement who provided the principle that God does not punish but corrects; Origen added that since the soul is essentially rational it must eventually be convinced of the divine truth⁵. Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, Hilary, Peter Chrysologus and even at one time Jerome of Bethlehem are all said to have written in favour of the teaching that ‘not a single being will be lost to the darkness

of sin and ignorance'. Yet John Chrysostom rejected the theory, and from the time of Augustine the Western Church also has emphasised that the punishment of sinners is eternal. Texts such as Isaiah 66:24 ('The worms that eat them will never die, and the fire that burns them will never be put out'), 1 Peter 4:18 ('If it is hard for a good man to be saved, what will happen to the wicked and to sinners?', cf. Prov 11:31), Revelation 20:15 ('If any one's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire'), Matthew 18:8 ('It is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire') and Matthew 25:46 ('And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life') argue that eternal damnation is the destiny of sinful human beings.⁶

The problem with the *apokatastasis pantôn* is that if everybody is going to end up reconciled with God *anyway*, what's the point of trying to teach our children the difference between right and wrong in the meantime? Even more critically (perhaps), of what use is the Church in this process? No wonder Maximus reserved the teaching of this doctrine to only his most advanced students—those 'perfected in love'⁷—and Origen himself said it was enough for the majority of the faithful to know that sinners will be punished. For Catholics the existence of hell was confirmed by the Councils of Lyons II (1274), Florence (1438-9) and Trent (1545-63), and Pope John Paul II 'updated' this teaching in 1999 when he said that: 'rather than a place, hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy.... Damnation consists precisely in definitive separation from God, freely chosen by the human person and confirmed with death that seals his choice forever. God's judgement ratifies this state'⁸. Whether Constantinople II (553) actually condemned Origen's teaching on the *apokatastasis* is still open to debate; nevertheless from the sixth century there has been an anathema upon those who state or



Michael Modini is a teacher at a Catholic high school in the Brisbane Archdiocese and a former student of both the Catholic Institute of Sydney and the Brisbane College of Theology.

believe that 'the world would be regenerated after destruction, and every creature would be saved'⁹.

The 'Two Feet of God'

The argument at the heart of any doctrine dealing with the 'greater hope' of universal salvation is, of course, that the divine justice and the divine mercy (St Bernard's 'two feet of God') have long been seen to be in tension. As Mark O'Brien wrote recently in *Compass*, 'it is fair to say that few of us would follow a God who is soft on evil (unjust) and few of us could relate to a God who is not loving and merciful'¹⁰. On the one hand the existence of hell is a given; on the other hand no-one among us really wants to spend eternity knowing that other people are suffering eternally in hell—especially when those people could so easily be us.

And yet, although God desires all to be saved (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4), in order for salvation to take place this desire must be mutual; to affirm the *apokatastasis* absolutely is, as Peter Phan says, to 'fail to take seriously human freedom as a created capacity for self-determination'¹¹. Pope John Paul II was characteristically emphatic on the subject. 'Can God,' he wrote, 'who has loved man so much, permit the man who rejects Him to be condemned to eternal torment? And yet, the words of Christ are unequivocal. In Matthew's Gospel He speaks clearly of those who will go to eternal punishment (cf. Mt 25:46). Who will these be? The Church has never made any pro-

nouncement in this regard.⁷¹²

Yet, although we cannot say definitively that ‘all will be saved’, nevertheless we are permitted—at least according to Hans Urs von Balthasar—to *hope* that all will be saved. Indeed, in his book of approximately that title, Balthasar says that ‘it is *necessary* for us to hope that all men are saved’ (emphasis added). As Avery Dulles explains, Balthasar:

... rejects the ideas that hell will be emptied at the end of time and that the damned souls and demons will be reconciled with God. He also avoids asserting as a fact that everyone will be saved. But he does say that we have a right and even a duty to hope for the salvation of all, because it is not impossible that even the worst sinners may be moved by God’s grace to repent before they die. He concedes, however, that the opposite is also possible. Since we are able to resist the grace of God, none of us is safe. We must therefore leave the question speculatively open, thinking primarily of the danger in which we ourselves stand.¹³

The problem—and the mystery—therefore remains. Phan adds that the doctrine of the *apocatastasis* is indissolubly linked with the theology of hope: ‘humanity encounters God’s saving will not in theoretical certainty but in hope’¹⁴. But is there really any hope for the unrepentant sinner—those men and women whom we love (and whom God loves so much), but who seem destined not to love God? Is there hope for those who deserve to die? For those who by their own actions condemn themselves to die forever?

The Transforming Power of Christ

For Hans Schwarz the doctrine of the *apocatastasis* is a christological one, ultimately resting on the conviction that ‘through Christ God has redeemed the whole of creation, a feat that does not tolerate any exception’¹⁵. If Schwarz is correct, and the ‘ancient and still amazingly modern confession of the Church [is that] we can be saved only by the compassion shown to us in Christ’¹⁶, then the second Person of the Trinity is ultimately more merciful than implacably just. I am reminded here

of the assertion that the *Apocalypse of Peter*—an influential early Christian text accepted as scriptural by both Clement of Alexandria and the compiler of the Muratorian canon—was rejected by the tradition of the Church primarily on the basis of its statement that it will be God, and not Christ, who will come to judge sinners¹⁷. St James’ statement that ‘mercy triumphs over judgement’ (James 2:13), Solomon’s that ‘even though you have absolute power, you are a merciful judge’ (Wisdom 12:18) and St Catherine of Siena’s that ‘you temper your justice with mercy’¹⁸, thereby become christological statements, complying with titles of Christ such as Wisdom (Sophia) and Life-giving Womb.

Yet God has always been merciful (cf. Psalms 103:8, 111:4) and there is something other than mercy involved here. As Professor and later Cardinal, Pope Benedict explored the theme of the after-life in the Regensburg *Dogmatic Theology* series. With reference to ‘the final purification of the elect’—the doctrine of Purgatory confirmed for Catholics by the 1336 bull *Benedictus Deus* of Benedict XII—the then-Professor Ratzinger noted that:

The Christianizing of the early Jewish notion of a purging fire lie[s] precisely in the insight that the purification involved does not happen through some thing, but through the transforming power of the Lord himself, whose burning flame cuts free our closed-off heart, melting it, and pouring it into a new mould to make it fit for the living organism of his body.¹⁹

In *Spe Salvi* the Pope developed this doctrine, explaining that although the Eastern Church ‘does not recognize the purifying and expiatory suffering of souls in the afterlife’²⁰ (i.e. Purgatory), nevertheless ‘some recent theologians are of the opinion that the fire which both burns and saves is Christ himself, the Judge and Saviour’²¹.

In *Eschatology*, Ratzinger asserted that the notion of a purging fire was rejected by Chrysostom (and thereby the Eastern Church at large) precisely because it had become (unnecessarily) linked with the idea of a general restoration / *apocatastasis*²². In *Spe Salvi*—as

in *Eschatology*—Pope Benedict went on to acknowledge that the Orthodox do, however, accept ‘various levels of beatitude and of suffering in the intermediate state’²³. For Greeks as for Latins the souls of the departed ...

... can receive ‘solace and refreshment’ through the Eucharist, prayer and almsgiving. The belief that love can reach into the afterlife, that reciprocal giving and receiving is possible, in which our affection for one another continues beyond the limits of death—this has been a fundamental conviction of Christianity throughout the ages and it remains a source of comfort to-day.²⁴

In the *Apocalypse of Peter*—that ‘most ancient work extant in which sinners are delivered from hell by the intercession of the righteous on or after the Day of Judgement’²⁵—it is the compassion of the saints which results in the conferral of divine mercy upon the damned. In his *Apocalypse*, St Peter is told by Christ himself that ‘it is because of them that have believed in me that, at their word, I shall have pity on men’²⁶. As co-workers of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 3:9), perhaps it is to the extent that we have not cared enough or carried the Lord’s message far enough in this life that the compassion of the saints becomes co-instrumental in the after-life instead.

The Transforming Power of the Church

But why should our compassion have this salvific aspect? Ultimately it must have something to do with our ‘putting on Christ’ (cf. Gal 3:27, Rom 13:14). For St Maximus, the will of God is by nature *saving*: by this saving will God created the world, became a human being, and raises men and women to immortality. The Word became flesh not in order to distort the nature that God had created, but to deify it, and the submission of the human will assumed by the Logos to the will of the Father—as an example of obedience for the sake of our salvation—suggests that it is the submission of our human wills to that of God which has salvific implications for the rest of humanity. Similarly, for St Catherine, the hu-

man soul:

... feeds and is nourished ...

By conforming her will with your high eternal will—

That will which wants nothing other than that we be made holy.

So the soul which considers this strips herself of her own will

And clothes herself in yours.²⁷

If it is true, furthermore, that compassion for others is a constitutive dimension of the perichoresis (genuine reciprocal penetration) of the two wills—divine and human—in Jesus Christ²⁸, and if it is true that there is a place for us in this divine-human interface, then in the process of our deification the compassion of Christ becomes our compassion as well. For St Maximus, the deification of humankind does not mean transforming it into something that it isn’t, but becoming more and more what it is—saying ‘yes’ rather than ‘no’, as Pope Benedict says; conforming ‘our will with the great truth of being’²⁹.

The ultimate reconciliation between God’s justice and God’s mercy seems, then, to have a communal—indeed, an ecclesial—aspect: through the ‘innumerable interactions’ that link the lives of all people we hope that we will be saved *together*. In *Spe Salvi* the Pope goes on to quote Henri de Lubac, who considered that salvation has always been a ‘social reality’.³⁰ Earlier, in *Eschatology*, Ratzinger had quoted Origen, who has ‘the finest statement on this that I have been able to find’. Origen used St Paul’s analogy of the one body of Christ to assert that it is ‘one body’ which is waiting for justification, ‘one body’ which rises for judgement.... You will have joy when you depart from this life if you are a saint. But your joy will be complete only when no member of your body is lacking to you.³¹ Balthasar preferred to quote Cardinal Daniélou, who wrote:

Too often we think of hope in too individualistic a manner as merely our personal salvation. But hope essentially bears on the great actions of God concerning the whole of creation. It bears on the destiny of all humanity. It is the salvation of the world that we await. In reality

hope bears on the salvation of all men—and it is only in the measure that I am immersed in them that it bears on me.³²

Hope is, then, a communal thing, and it is this *res communis* that ‘liberates us from the shallowness, apathy and self-absorption which deaden our souls and poison our relationships’³³. It is because our hope is ecclesial that we can rejoice in the purpose of God’s will set forth in Christ, which is ‘to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth’ (Eph 1:10). And it is because we are all connected that there is hope in the life after this life for us all.

I forget who it was that first said that every theologian creates God in his or her own image. Currently I am a teacher at an Australian high school, and my God is therefore one who wants more than anything else for all his students, without exception, to pass into the eternal blessedness of life beyond Year 12. Whether this theology strictly coincides with the one the Living God has dreamed up for us in eternal reality I probably won’t know until I graduate myself. Nevertheless, if I have learned anything from St Maximus the Confessor and his friends, it is that it is one in which I am encouraged to hope.

NOTES

1 Cf. the words of Christ to St Martha: ‘If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die’ (John 11:25-6).

2 Although clearly—apart from the early Christian Platonists—none of the writers mentioned in this article seriously believed that souls ‘return’ (like planets) to an original starting point in heaven.

3 Hans Urs von Balthasar (*Dare we hope ‘that all men be saved’?*, 225) points out that the translation ‘until everything predicted by God’s prophets has come about’ is equally possible. The reference to ‘all men’ in the title of the book means, of course, ‘all people’.

4 Or ‘all things to all people’.

5 Hans Schwarz (*Eschatology*, 339) notes that even though Origen believed ‘God through Christ will restore his entire creation’ he also believed in the end there will be a complete destruction of the body, and the restoration will involve ‘various movements of progress’.

6 Other popular New Testament texts that refer to eternal punishment include Matthew 5:22, 5:29 and parallels, 8:12, 13:42, 13:50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30, 25:41; Luke 13:28, 16:26; John 15:6; Romans 9:22; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 2:15, 4:3; Philippians 3:19; 1 Thessalonians 5:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:9, 2:10; 1 Timothy 6:9; Revelation 14:10, 19:20, 21:8. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 284, notes 75 & 76.

7 Balthasar, *Dare we hope ‘that all men be saved’?*, 246.

8 John Paul II, General Audience of Wednesday, 28th July, 1999.

9 John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 185. Cf. Henricus Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, #411.

10 Mark O’Brien, ‘The Bible and the Blurb’, *Compass*, Vol. 41 (2007), No. 4, 17.

11 Peter C. Phan, *Eternity in Time: A Study of Karl Rahner’s Eschatology*, 154.

12 John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 185. With regard to the last part of this statement, Pope Pius III is said to have pronounced irredeemable the soul of his predecessor, Alexander VI (d. 1503), while even today the people of Rimini insist that their Duke Sigismondo Malatesta (d. 1468) was damned *in medias vitas* by Pius II.

13 Avery Dulles, ‘First Things’, quoted at Ignatius Press, ‘Balthasar books’.

14 Phan, *Eternity in Time*, 155.

15 Schwarz, *Eschatology*, 341. Schwarz adds (p. 351) that ‘we know that a person will only be saved for Christ’s sake’.

16 Schwarz, *Eschatology*, 350.

17 Richard Bauckham (*The Fate of the Dead: Studies in the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, 232) adds that, according to this document, it is Christ who effects the release of the damned from hell, because he is the eschatological judge who has condemned them.

18 Mary O’Driscoll, *Catherine of Siena: Passion for the Truth, Compassion for Humanity*, 91.

19 Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 229. On the

following page of the same work Ratzinger describes Purgatory as ‘the inwardly necessary process of transformation in which a person becomes capable of Christ, capable of God and thus capable of unity with the whole communion of saints’.

20 Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 48.

21 Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 47. ‘His gaze, the touch of his heart heals us through an undeniably painful transformation ‘as through fire’.’

22 Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 227.

23 Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 48; cf. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 228.

24 Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 48. Pope Benedict’s purgatory is less a place of suffering, then, than a place of hope.

25 Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 144. Bauckham (pp. 233-4) describes this *Apocalypse* as just one of a number of apocryphal writings in which the eponymous heroes (the Virgin, St Peter, St Paul, St Michael), when confronted with the suffering of the damned in hell, are moved to com-

passion and obtain for them from God a period of respite from their suffering. Naturally, in the *Apocalypse*, God tells Peter to keep this information a secret: ‘You must not tell that which you hear to the sinners lest they transgress the more’.

26 Early Christian Writings, ‘The Apocalypse of Peter’.

27 O’Driscoll, *Catherine of Siena*, 55. In her *Dialogo*, St Catherine is told (p. 170) that ‘the union which the soul has made with me is more perfect than the union between the soul itself and its own body’.

28 See Part I of this essay.

29 Benedict XVI, General Audience of Wednesday, 25th June, 2008.

30 Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 14.

31 Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 185-6.

32 Balthasar, *Dare we hope ‘that all men be saved’?*, 166-7, citing Daniélou’s *Essai sur le mystère de l’histoire*, 340.

33 Benedict XVI, Homily, World Youth Day.

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